

Communication and Training. How to Become your Dog's Best Friend

As a behavior consultant and trainer, my job is bridging the communication gap between people and their pets. Our pets are not born knowing how to live with people. They spend the first seven to nine weeks living primarily with their own specie. Then, one day, they are whisked away to a foreign land where no one communicates with their language and all sorts of strange and mysterious rules abound.

For communication to be effective, both parties need to understand clearly what is being said. Since we are the caretakers for our pets, it is our responsibility for clear communication. The better we can “read” our pet's needs by understanding their behavior, the better we can help them navigate through the complex and sometimes very confusing world of humans.

I find the greatest challenge in helping dog owners to become their dog's teacher is helping them master the art of timely reinforcing positive behavior from their pet. Many times the problem is that the owner doesn't have a clear image of what they expect from their dog. Although most owners know what they *don't* want their dog to do, they often fail to think about what they would rather see in its place. A clear mental picture will allow the owner/trainer to give correctly timed feedback to their dog.

Sometimes family members have different perceptions about how the family dog should behave. But, just like good parents, the family must become united when raising their four-legged child. I find it useful to hold a family meeting around the kitchen table and outline the vocabulary the family will use when talking to their puppy. This is also a good time to outline the rules and routine for the puppy in the household.

Because dogs communicate nonverbally they are very practiced at reading body language. Because of this, our dogs will look for clues about what we are trying to communicate rather than listen for them. As people, we tend to listen for clues to communication primarily and this difference can lead to miscommunication between our two species. When I work with owners and their pets, it is sometimes a challenge to teach owners to stop talking and just observe their pet. Because they are watching us, our behavior will influence how our pet behaves. Good trainers know this and will alter their behavior to influence their student. This puts the pet in a positive place, allowing the trainer to praise, reinforcing the success.

Animals learn by repeating pleasant situations and avoiding unpleasant ones. Both people and dogs are creatures of habit. We learn to repeat what works and to keep repeating it until there is a good reason to change. Motivators, such as food and praise, will encourage our pet to continue trying behaviors. For instance, if a dog has learned that sitting will get him a biscuit, he will continue to repeat the behavior until what he is doing no longer works. At that point, he will change his strategy (or behavior) looking for the new key to success.

For some dogs, the “work” may be itself rewarding. For a retriever, playing fetch or chasing down a bird to bring back to his owner is a self-rewarding task. The same is true for a herding dog allowed to bring in the flock. A tractable dog, one that has been bred to work in a partnership with people may be willing to work long hours with the simple reward of hearing his owner say, “*Gooooood Boy*”, or to receive strokes on the head.

However, some dogs are more independent in nature, and motivators other than praise may be required. Motivators that come from within the dogs' environment can be very powerful. The scents that enter a hound's nose can be more important to the dog than his owner's call to come. In order to overcome this very natural affinity, the owner must offer something much more interesting than trailing enticing odors. Once your pet has learned that you offer something better, he will be more likely to attend to what you are trying to communicate.

Like raising a child, schooling your dog should employ a combination of plentiful praise and a firm set of standards. Positive training doesn't mean without rules or discipline. Rather it implies that the focus of the training should be guiding your dog to do the proper thing by concentrating on helping him to achieve the right behaviors rather than focusing on correcting the inappropriate ones. By spending quality time with your dog, you will develop a strong, mutual relationship. Your efforts today will create a companion that will be welcome anywhere the two of you may go.